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Dodged debts and the submissive predator: perspectives on Amazonian relations of dependence

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This article explores the nature of inter-ethnic asymmetry and the dynamic of long-term dependence in Amazonia. Drawing on the case of the Sanema and their neighbouring Ye'kwana, it seeks to gain a deeper understanding of submission and indebtedness with a view to rethinking where the power might lie in such relationships. The association between the two groups, I argue, is motivated by the Sanema's pursuit of manufactured items, access to which the Ye'kwana had historically monopolized. The dynamic entered into in order to procure these goods is one of voluntary deference on the part of the Sanema, a demeanour that is actively pursued because it enables morally valued autonomy and a freedom from ongoing reciprocity. I conclude that this 'submissive extraction' can offer new perspectives on the relationship between debt, predation, and freedom.

Valentín crouched in the dark corner of the Ye'kwana communal house without saying a word. His eyes were fixed firmly on the floor ahead of him as he nervously fiddled with the keys hanging from a string around his neck. Despite the multitude of other people bustling around him, slinging up their hammocks, and slurping gourds of cassava gruel after their long journeys, Valentín barely looked up to acknowledge the activity. Both he and his companions, who were assembled around him in a tight cluster, seemed to exhibit acute apprehension at their surroundings. They had just arrived, like many others from surrounding communities, to receive a medical check-up at a government run pop-up clinic (*Sp. operativa*) stationed in the large Ye'kwana community for the weekend. Before long a stocky and stern-looking man strode over to Valentín and asked him something in Ye'kwana with an irritated tone that betrayed a shade of reproach, and Valentín all but cowered away in response. I observed this interaction with alarm because the Valentín whom I was witnessing in this context was nothing like the Valentín whom I had been getting to know over the past

month. Just days before in his Sanema community further upstream he had been asserting his bravery and confidently threatening to fight those who underestimated him, stomping his feet to imitate a ferocious peccary and shouting ‘*sa kili mai ke!*’ (I’m not afraid!). I was learning that he was known for speaking his mind, for being an excellent hunter, and for often beating his wife, all characteristics of a *wano waitili*, a fearless man.

The Sanema are the northernmost branch of the Yanomami language family,¹ a customarily semi-nomadic hunting and foraging indigenous people who inhabit the forests of Southern Venezuela and Northern Brazil.² Their southern Yanomami cousins became somewhat famous for their bellicosity after the release of Napoleon Chagnon’s controversial monograph *Yanomamö: the fierce people* (1968), and even though the portrayal of inherently aggressive peoples was harshly critiqued by anthropologist Jaques Lizot, he, too, has asserted that for the Yanomami ‘submission is contrary to Indian morality; it is dishonourable’ (1994: 857). Even today, one of the most famous international exemplars of indigenous assertiveness, self-determination, and autonomy is a Yanomami man, activist Davi Kopenawa (see Kopenawa & Albert 2013). Yet Valentín, face-to-face with the Ye’kwana in the communal house, seemed to be the antithesis of such assertiveness. He appeared afraid, awkward, and even vulnerable. This change in behaviour was not unique to him; it was something I observed frequently in the Sanema, leading me to often ponder why there was such a stark contrast between their fearless and commanding disposition when in their communities, and their submissive and deferent demeanour when in the presence of their neighbouring Ye’kwana. Moreover, oral histories revealed that the apparently asymmetrical relationship between the two groups was the result not of ‘capture’, as is the case in other regions of Amazonia (see Santos-Granero 2009), but rather of sustain co-residence initiated by the Sanema themselves.

This article will build on wider efforts in the discipline of anthropology to reconceptualize asymmetry and freedom by exploring dependence in the Amazonian context. I shall argue that the relationship between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana actually reveals that, where voluntary submission to others is the dominant dynamic, this relational scheme can be viewed as a form of predation on the part of the dependent peoples, which I describe in terms of eschewing debt. The following section will outline the literature on Amazonian mastery, inter-ethnic asymmetry and submission-as-worldview in order to offer insights into the nuances of Amazonian sociality beyond mutuality or alterity. I then go on to give an overview of the historical interaction between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema, offering a backdrop to the current relationship of dependence as premised on ongoing acts of goods procurement. With this context laid out, the register of deference will be explored by showing that the Sanema characteristically seek to subvert balanced relationality through a shirking of their 'debts' in a number of contexts. I conclude by arguing that both peaceful predation and voluntary subjection actually facilitate freedom and autonomy, and can serve to challenge conventional ideas of inequality and resistance beyond Amazonia.

Being as belonging

In an endeavour to challenge axioms that assert a universal human desire for independence and freedom, growing scholarly interest in the perspectives of those who inhabit subservient roles has recently revealed that subordination is not always equated with deficient subjectivity or lack of control. James Ferguson, for instance, explored a number of cases in southern Africa in which relations of dependence and paternalism continue to be sought despite the abolition of apartheid and cheap migrant labour. This, he states, is because in this context '*being* someone continued to imply *belonging* to someone' (2013: 227, original emphasis). He goes on to show how enduring associations of dependence such as these

generate great unease in the ‘emancipatory liberal mind’ because they seem to be inimical to the valued liberty that is considered central to human dignity and free will. One of the obstacles of this liberal model of person – of the independent individual – is the tendency to overlook the relationality inherent in personhood and the manifold forms that it takes. Numerous studies have expounded on personhood as constituted through attachments to others rather than through exchanges between discrete individuals (see, e.g., Sahlin 2011). Moreover, valuing liberty alone risks neglecting divergent approaches to power relations that might reveal asymmetries to be pivotal. Saba Mahmood’s (2004) approach to subjection specifically appealed for an alternative to the liberal assumption that all humans have an innate drive to assert freedom and to resist coercive constraints. She argues that within the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, subjection in the form of the veil, although viewed externally as exploitation of women, was in fact not only experienced as the quintessence of piety, but its use also imbued one with profound agency in the religious experience. Much of this work has been inspired by a Foucauldian notion of freedom (Foucault 1990), in which it is defined not as a lack of forces or constraints, but rather as an existential realization of one’s subjectivity in relation to the world.

The idea that subjectivity emerges from complex relationships with powerful others is a paradigmatic Amazonian inquiry, and dates back to Lévi-Strauss’s extensive analysis of Amerindian mythology, which led to an exploration of the importance of non-equivalence in the region (1995). While today studies of the unstable tension inherent in Amazonian relations of difference have developed into a more nuanced comprehension of sustained and deep-seated asymmetries (see Brightman 2010: 154), in the past these ideas were often eclipsed by the twofold model of Amazonian sociality in terms of either the ‘moral economy of intimacy’ or the ‘symbolic economy of alterity’ (see Viveiros de Castro 1996). In the first approach, egalitarianism and conviviality are considered dominant and encompassing modes

of social relation that serve to thwart power structures or mechanisms of coercion (see Clastres 1987; Overing & Passes 2000). The other approach shifts the focus to alterity and endogenous values of enmity, capture, and predation, underscoring the importance of the exterior as the source of creativity and social reproduction so that ‘sociality begins where sociability stops’ (Viveiros de Castro 2001: 24). While not wishing to present a false opposition between the two modalities – both conviviality and alterity, after all, exist in relationship with one another – they may be even more interrelated than previously thought. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the fact that features considered typical of one modality might depend on strategies of the other; specifically that the pursuit of egalitarianism might simultaneously rely on accompanying acts of predation.

In terms of asymmetry, the latter relational schema of alterity has been highly influential for scholars who feel not only that affinity and exchange are paradigmatic of social reproduction in lowland South America, but also that an underlying logic of ‘mastery’ is central to relationality in the region, a notion that was first explored by Carlos Fausto. This wide-ranging terrain of ‘mastery’ in Amazonian scholarship has included relations of adoptive filiation, capture, cannibalism, hunting, and a shaman’s relationship with his auxiliary spirits, all of which comprise the essential ‘appropriation of an alien subjectivity’ (Fausto 1999: 947) central to Amerindian sociality. Crucially, the relationship established as a result of this process of so-called ‘familiarization’ is one of protection, nourishment, and symbolic control (as though towards a child or pet) on the part of the capturing party (predator), and of deference and dependence on the part of the victims. Indeed, Fausto finds the category of ‘master’/‘owner’ to be extensive within the Amazonian cosmos as a whole, so that ‘everything in principle has or may have an owner: the forest, animals, rivers and lakes, but also an animal species, another plant species, or a particular stand of bamboo, a curve of the river, a certain tree, a particular mountain’ (2008: 340). So widespread and fundamental is

this construct that in some contexts the body – a stabilizing force – can be seen as ‘owner’ of the soul – the inherently mobile and volatile component of the self – as Luiz Costa (2010) highlights among the Kanamari.

Given that predation is an act of familiarizing, one gains the impression from Fausto’s model that the passage from affinity to consanguinity results in a reconfiguration of relations from those of antagonism and danger to those of control and protection. That is, in its archetypal form, mastery is inherently transformative and irreversible; the creation of similarity out of difference. Yet, many forms of mastery and capture might result in what Vanessa Grotti and Marc Brightman refer to as ‘domestication without assimilation’ (2010: 57). They give the example of the relationship between the Trio and the Akuriyo of southern Suriname, in which the Akuriyo were ‘captured’ by their neighbouring Trio in the 1950s and 1960s during a process of missionary-instigated ‘cumulative evangelism’. These ‘wild others’ were seized and ‘civilized’, and subsequently incorporated into village life through the active transformation of bodily practice and appearance. However, since the Akuriyo were considered immutably wild and inherently inferior, they remained in ‘a constant state of becoming’ (2010: 57); never able to truly transcend their subservient role to the Trio and thereby entering into what Grotti and Brightman refer to as ‘asymmetric consanguinity’, in which both affinity and consanguinity ‘shade into each other’ (2010: 60). Obstacles to assimilation such as this result in alternative forms of relationality to those offered by Fausto; those not predicated on the creation of sameness through co-residence or incorporation, but rather the preservation of long-term asymmetry.

While this study is insightful, here again questions emerge regarding the perspective of the ‘captured’ party and whether they are able or willing to desert the dynamic of asymmetry of which they have become a part. The Trio/Akuriyo case is not the only one in which one is left wondering what the dependent party feel about their fate as slaves-cum-

children (although Grotti and Brightman give a brief insight into Akuriyo bitterness – 2010: 63), because descriptions of this model offer the view of ‘familiarizing’ rather than ‘being familiarized’, as it were. In short, not all relations of dependence in Amazonia are cases of active predation on the part of the ‘master’. Indeed, around the same time that Fausto was extending his theory of mastery, Laura Rival was offering an alternative outlook on the paradigm in which occupying the position of ‘prey’ itself constitutes a distinct moral ethos among some Amazonian groups, which manifests as voluntary submission and the aesthetics of deference. For the Huaorani of Ecuador, she noted (Rival 1999), it is precisely the ‘prey’ position, of identifying oneself as a victim of predators, that defines one as truly human (*huaorani*), in opposition to and ontologically differentiated from cannibal others (*cohuori*). So, rather than engaging in familiarization for the purposes of social reproduction, the Huaorani actively avoid others at all costs through extensive mobility and the exploitation of the ‘natural abundance’ of the forest. Nonetheless, it is notable that characterization of predators remains that of an aggressive adversary who is ‘continuously snatching the creativity, vitality, and life force of huaorani people’ (1999: 77), and that is the reason why prey continually flee (see also Cepek 2015).

Harry Walker’s accounts of the Urarina present some similarities with the Huaorani ‘prey position’, yet rather than being premised on escape and differentiation from dangerous predators, it is articulated as being ‘watched over’ and on eliciting impulses of pity and ‘paternalistic benevolence’ in powerful others (2013: 167). In this case, voluntary submission rather than capturing and fleeing become cosmologically productive, because such actions mirror the Urarina’s relationship with the ‘creator’ and thus manifest as agentive mastery through the subaltern stance. In this sense, shifting the emphasis away from notions of ‘prey’ and ‘victim’, we might instead see the role of those in a deferential position as closer to that of a ‘parasite’ (Bonilla 2005: 47; see also Serres 1980), namely as engaging in a non-mutual

symbiosis in which the dependent party exploit their hosts while retaining a degree of autonomy and perhaps even power. This is precisely the theoretical stance taken by Oiara Bonilla to describe the submission of the Brazilian Paumari towards outsiders. She argues that they elicited pity in others and ‘ended up dominating, to a certain extent, the relationship with the interlocutor, forcing the latter to adopt the position of domesticating boss, or adoptive parent’ (2009: 141; see also Fausto 2008: 333). These affective strategies, Bonilla argues, mark a transformation of the familiarization schema to one more analogous with clientelism (2005: 59), in which the ‘master’ is impelled to act as provider of food and goods.

We can see from the cases thus far presented that rather than viewing social relations in Amazonia as being premised entirely on egalitarianism or violence, nor on affinal assimilation (see also Karadimas 2001; Taylor 2007), they could arguably be associated with peaceable ontological differentiation and the procurement of goods. Furthermore, it is clear that the practice of submitting oneself to the will of outsiders is not a last-resort reaction, nor is it inimical to agency or subjectivity. Nevertheless, much of this literature tends to polarize the categories of predator and prey, even if identification with each modality is seen to be shifting over time from one to the other. When considering Bonilla’s shrewd assertion that ‘the predatory weapon of the Paumari is their capacity for submission’ (2005: 59), we might see previously opposed relational modes (egalitarianism and predation) as far more congruous, and that prey are at the same time also predators.

In the following sections I shall pursue Bonilla’s logic by suggesting that the relationship between the Ye’kwana and Sanema is actually antagonistic to true and balanced exchange because the Sanema are extracting resources in a predatory way. This peculiar dynamic is in fact a strategy for maintaining autonomy and freedom (unlike, for instance, the case of the Akuriyo). To explore these matters further, I must first justify the language used throughout the article. I have chosen not to use the terms ‘inequality’ or ‘hierarchy’. The

former retains certain connotations with either distributive justice and market rationality, on the one hand (see Callinicos 2000), or anti-discrimination and contentious ideas of fairness, on the other (see Phillips 2004). The latter is often associated with what Louis Dumont (1980 [1966]) considers to be a complex system of structural harmony and symbiosis. Instead I have opted to use the terms ‘asymmetry’ and ‘dependency’ in order to better capture the idea of non-equivalence inherent in Amazonian ontology and mythology (see Lévi-Strauss 1995), as well as the idea that subjectivity, and indeed subjection, is based on relational difference (e.g. Foucault 1990). Before turning to these concerns, I shall first offer a brief description of the historically transforming encounter between the Ye’kwana and the Sanema.

The relationship between the Ye’kwana and the Sanema

Brian Ferguson observed that ‘the main thread running through Sanema history is their changing interaction with the Yecuana’ (1995: 100), and it is fair to say that this relationship continues to define the Sanema to this day. Over the last two centuries, Yanomami groups undertook a gradual and ‘great expansion’ northwards from the Parima Highlands of the Guiana Shield (Colchester 1982: 72), pushed by warring groups to the south and lured towards the industrial goods that were in the possession of the Ye’kwana. This Carib-speaking group that inhabited the northern regions had direct access to trade goods since as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, when the Spanish invaded Ye’kwana territory in the search for El Dorado (see Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 15-27). A long history of trade relations with colonial representatives endured, which in turn led to opportunities in diamond mining, debt peonage, and cash crops.³ Since the 1950s, the Ye’kwana have also had intimate interactions with a number of missionary groups, beginning with Baptist missionaries who settled along the Cunucunuma River in 1956, and later with two Catholic missions in Alto Erebató in 1958. The Catholic clergy, in particular, emphasized the material advantages of

settling near their mission posts, offering long-term credit and manufactured goods in exchange for crafts that they sold to folklore shops in the cities (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 16-27). The Sanema's autonomous procurement of goods was only made possible much later in the 1960s when a Catholic mission (and later a number of evangelical missions) was founded in Kanadakuni (Colchester 1982: 387). Until this time, they were entirely dependent on the Ye'kwana for their manufactured items.

Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez (1974: 42-4) notes that testimonies of the earliest cases of Sanema encroachment into Ye'kwana territory occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, around the same time that steel items began to flood into the region during an era of accelerated development, trading, and resource extraction (see also R.B. Ferguson 1995: 102). By the 1920s, Sanema villages began to appear closer to Ye'kwana communities in the Upper Ventuari and Merevari in order to gain access to much-valued and scarce steel goods, ostensibly procured through the peaceful trade of arrows and cotton, but also through violence and raiding when other routes were unavailable to them. By the 1930s, Ye'kwana communities had become so aggravated by Sanema truculence and regular thefts that a renowned chief of the Upper Ventuari named Kalomera rallied numerous surrounding Ye'kwana villages to take action (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974: 43; Gheerbrant, 1953: 181). Obtaining shotguns from the neighbouring Pemon, many Ye'kwana co-operated in a vicious attack which saw scores of Sanema slain, their futile bows and arrows no match for mighty Ye'kwana firearms (Colchester 1981: 27; Ramos 1979: 5). This period of conflict has often been referred to as a 'war' in the literature, with the outcome described as a Sanema defeat and a subsequent inter-ethnic co-operation. After this transformative skirmish, the Sanema participated in fewer raids and instead adopted a servile relationship to the Ye'kwana, shifting 'to a pattern of peaceful but subservient coexistence with their former enemies ... all

to obtain worn-down steel and other second-hand Western manufactures' (R.B. Ferguson 1995: 113).

Rather than retreating as a result of their 'defeat', the Sanema drew even closer to their neighbouring group, since withdrawal would result in a severe deficiency in indispensable steel tools that were increasingly crucial for daily subsistence tasks, as well as for conviviality and care through gifts to kin (see also Gordon 2010). Instead, the Sanema established 'satellite' settlements affiliated with Ye'kwana villages, usually only a short walk away, or at times even within the Ye'kwana communities themselves. When Marcus Colchester conducted his fieldwork among the Sanema in the late 1970s, he noted that only four of the seventeen Sanema settlements in the Caura region of southern Venezuela were not associated with a Ye'kwana community (1982: 104), and according to him this was a dynamic initiated by the Ye'kwana (1982: 55). These 'post-war' satellite communities exhibited a distinctly patron-client dynamic in which the Sanema supplied cheap labour for Ye'kwana communities – collecting thatch, constructing houses, felling trees, and portaging supplies around rapids (Arvelo Jiménez 1974: 43) – in exchange for the goods on which the relationship had always been premised. On observing interactions in these contexts of labour relations, Colchester felt that the patron-client association was exploitative, with the Ye'kwana paying only in goods rather than their promised cash remuneration (1982: 348-9). He also noted that during the height of the 'satellite' era, the Ye'kwana took an active role in 'civilizing' the Sanema, often temporarily fostering Sanema children, who would later return to Sanema communities ready to disseminate Ye'kwana ideologies. Although this seemed to be an attempt to improve Sanema political cohesiveness and thereby organize them into a more effective and reliable workforce, Colchester questions the effectiveness of these strategies because imposed roles were rarely accepted within Sanema communities (1982: 107).

There is no mistaking the mutual distain between the two groups in historical accounts of the relationship, with the Sanema often referred to as ‘dirty pigs’ by Ye’kwana in Alain Gheerbrant’s travel memoirs of 1953, and ‘treated as sub-human’ in other accounts (Ramos 1979: 20). The Sanema are shown to equally despise the Ye’kwana for their overbearing, unsympathetic, and humourless character (Colchester 1982: 104-5), and for being ‘pompous and presumptuous, incest lovers and *caxiri* [manioc beer] drinkers, who exploit them and bother their women’ (Ramos 1979: 6). It was clear during my fieldwork that, in the contemporary context, Ye’kwana and Sanema communities are shifting the relational register yet again, now premising their relationship on political co-operation and the establishment of a multi-ethnic tribal council – Kuyujani – that purports to defend the rights of both ethnic groups. Although the council was set up and co-ordinated by the Ye’kwana, the two groups collaborated in a management plan for the Caura Basin in 2001 in which they worked together in mapping the territory with GPS technology in preparation for a joint land-titling application. Sanema participation in Kuyujani activities since this management plan, however, has greatly waned, in part because they were originally invited to participate by now absent foreign NGO representatives rather than by the Ye’kwana themselves.

Over the decades, then, the relationship between the Ye’kwana and the Sanema has changed from one of hostility and violence to a relationship of peaceful dependence. In the remainder of this article, I will show that while at first glance it appears as though the Sanema continue to be exploited by the Ye’kwana, closer analysis of their current relationship reveals that often it is the Sanema who have sought out this dynamic of dependence and in fact take on the submissive role for their own objectives, namely to peacefully obtain goods. We will see that submission can be regarded as an ingenious act of power on their part.

Submission and ‘fear’

The trip to the ‘operative’ described in the opening vignette highlighted the deferential and somewhat contradictory demeanour on the part of my hosts, who were confident and assertive within their community but mute and humble among the Ye’kwana. Valentín and his companions inhabited a nearby satellite community who were dependent on their Ye’kwana neighbours for goods, medicine, and trips downriver in Ye’kwana-owned canoes. But it was not until much later on in my fieldwork period that I began to see the relationship between the two groups in a different light; it increasingly seemed as though the Sanema were seeking out the role of dependants, and that the Ye’kwana were revealing themselves as more generous or impartial than I had previously thought. On many occasions I accompanied my Sanema hosts to Ye’kwana communities for medicine or on passing visits, and noticed each time that they switched to an unusually quiet and austere demeanour, a far cry from their typically chatty, humorous, and sometimes even aggressive selves when in theirs or other Sanema communities. Nevertheless, their deference towards the Ye’kwana was strangely accompanied by a bold encroachment into homes and gardens, usually followed by a meek and passive acceptance of the inevitable offerings that issued forth: small gifts, medicine, food, and invitations to watch films on Ye’kwana DVD players.

When Ye’kwana described the encounters, they often used the language of sympathy and support, stating that they ‘take pity’ (Sp. *tener lástima*) on the Sanema, and that the reason they are ‘poor’ (Sp. *humilde*) is because they don’t understand or aren’t used to the ‘civilized’ way of life. I also began to notice that Ye’kwana men would often approach Sanema to shake their hands and refer to them as ‘our Sanema brothers’ (Sp. *nuestros hermanos Sanema*). However, it is important not to take at face value these proclamations of fictive kinship implicit in the term ‘brother’, particularly from the perspective of the

Ye'kwana, who are politically sophisticated (see Lauer 2006) and use the popular rhetoric of multiculturalism and indigenous unity on a regular basis. Even the fostering of Sanema children cannot be viewed in simply paternalistic terms, particularly if we consider the degree of deference that the Sanema exhibit towards the Ye'kwana, which is not exhibited towards actual fathers. I shall explain in the sections that follow why both potential affinity and fictive kinship are unsuitable schemas with which to interpret the relationship between the two groups. For now, I will unpack Sanema vernacular on concepts related to non-equivalence, dependence, and deference.

Numerous Sanema relationships are governed by asymmetry and dependence: in particular age sets, affinal relationships, and a shaman's affinity with his *jikula* spirits allies (which he describes as his sons – *pösö*). Though this does not intimate that society as a whole is hierarchical, it does underscore the idea – expounded by Claire Lorrain (2000) – that in Amazonia symbolic 'hierarchies', as she terms it, are common between those of different 'kinds', such as between gender and age categories. Within Sanema mythology, the prototypical primordial relationship between the mythical demiurge Omaö and his younger trickster brother Soawë is markedly asymmetrical and is indeed why the younger brother is so mischievous in response to his brother's commands, as we shall see in the Myth of the Origin of Modern Goods below. Other relations of non-equivalence akin to that between younger and older siblings – woman and man,⁴ child and parent, for instance – are common and are marked by specific terms: unripe (*oshiati*), soft (*ipöti*), and little (*osowai*) versus real (*sai*), firm (*amatosi*), and big (*pada*).

The paradigmatic relationship of asymmetry in everyday Sanema life is that between a son-in-law and his mother/father-in-law, which is defined by the ubiquitous morpheme *kili*. The rudimentary translation of this significant term would be 'fear', but it also encompasses important subtleties related to embarrassment, shame, wariness, prudishness, modesty,

timidity, cowardice, and obedience. In expression of this ‘fear’, a son-in-law’s autonomy is restricted until his second child is born, and he is obliged to offer physical labour in horticulture, hunting, and construction tasks for his parents-in-law during his period of uxori-local residence. Crucially, sons-in-law must exhibit extreme deference towards their parents-in-law during this time and are forbidden to address them, or even to face in their direction – a striking physical submission described locally as ‘mother-in-law fear’ (*kamani pisisima na kilipa kamani pusapa kilibai*). The term *kili* is also used to describe those who beg submissively and elicit pity – ‘*pebali kiliai*’ (lit. ‘poor little fearful one’) – like cowering dogs with frantically wagging tails. More importantly, though, *kili* is used to describe Sanema relationships with the Ye’kwana, which manifest in a similarly deferential pity-eliciting demeanour. In this sense, *kili* is as close as one can come to the concept of asymmetry in Sanema vernacular, and presents a contrasting angle to the Western Amazonian idiom of ‘mastery’ expounded by Fausto (2013: 176).

This sentiment of non-equivalence expressed through registers of *kili* was perhaps best exemplified in the feminized role that some Sanema men were assigned to when co-residing with the Ye’kwana; specifically when carrying out tasks of collecting water, taking care of the children, harvesting and processing manioc, and cooking. During an earlier trip to the region in 2008, in which I spent the majority of my time in Ye’kwana communities working on a basket-weaving project, my Ye’kwana host family had an elusive young teenager residing at their house whose relationship to the others at the time I could not place. He was often solitary, seemed more introverted than the others, and was always hard at work doing chores of collecting water and firewood, and looking after the babies when the women were elsewhere. He was ordered to do my cooking for me and carry my bags. On the few evenings when he was not working, I would see him silently sitting with the Ye’kwana girls at the edges of the community, watching the boys play football. It was only years later when I

saw him again in a Sanema encampment in the frontier town, now self-assured and talkative, that I realized he was in fact a Sanema youth and that he had been going to school in the Ye'kwana community while under the guardianship of the family with whom I had been staying.

Cultural models of feminization became embodied by the Sanema on a number of other levels too, because, like women, they speak less Spanish, are less politically active, are unfamiliar with the non-indigenous world, and few are formally educated like the Ye'kwana. Even though gender dynamics within Sanema communities are relatively equal, some of my interlocutors recognized that this reversal of gender roles had degrading undertones. During a community meeting, for example, Valentín emphasized his irritation over the Ye'kwana's overbearing condescension by stating that Sanema men are strong adult male humans, and should not be treated otherwise:

We are not children! We have to work hard like men, not in the work that the Ye'kwana assign to us. We're not old, we are strong! We have to make our own community. We have to live apart from the Ye'kwana. We are people too!⁵

Despite this assertive sentiment and a number of similar others that I heard during fieldwork, most Sanema communities maintained their intimate association with, and dependence on, their neighbouring Ye'kwana. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the relationship has a long and entrenched history, and most of the oral histories I collected told stories of a life alongside the Ye'kwana, either in encampments within their communities or in satellite settlements a short walk away. Some described amiable and 'family-like' relations with the Ye'kwana, some stated they lived nearby but with little interaction, while others recounted that the Ye'kwana ordered them around, were always 'angry', and regularly beat them. In some stories, Sanema

respondents told me that despite helping with the productive activities of their neighbouring Ye'kwana community, they were frequently at the receiving end of outbursts of irritation, ordered to leave the area and establish a new settlement elsewhere. At least three times during my fieldwork I witnessed large Sanema encampments suddenly appearing within Ye'kwana communities, unprompted according to the Ye'kwana residents, and usually in order to obtain goods or manioc.

From the analysis presented here, one might argue that there is a degree to which the relationship between the Sanema and the Ye'kwana could be deemed analogous to potential affinity (Viveiros de Castro 2001), that Sanema deference demonstrates their eagerness to assume the role of Ye'kwana sons-in-law. However, real affinity with the Ye'kwana is never fully realized, and is indeed outwardly rejected. Furthermore, it increasingly became clear that the Sanema were anything but forced to interact in this way according to any assigned roles. This is not to suggest that the demeanour of submission was somehow disingenuous, but rather that it was a mode of action that was reserved for interactions with powerful 'others', a temporary affective register utilized in order to procure goods.

Extracting goods

When the Ye'kwana 'take pity' on the Sanema, this is precisely the emotive response that the Sanema elicit in order to inspire empathy and thus obtain goods, in much the same way that the Paumari place themselves 'in the weaker position [in order to] oblige their interlocutors to assume the role of providers of material and symbolic goods' (Bonilla 2013: 247). Responses of 'pity' and compassion (*otetaö*) are central to the demand-sharing economy, which is established through an obligation to give things upon request without the expectation of equivalent return (see Bird-David 1990). Laura Rival argues that demand-sharing is the essence of autonomy, because by being premised on non-reciprocal relations, it 'produce[s] a

collectivity ... in which givers never become creditors, nor receivers debtors' (2002: 104). It is this same logic of receiving without incurring debts that underlies Huaorani ideas of natural abundance, in which trees and plant foods give continuously to humans without asking anything in return (Rival 1999: 77), and which is also the frame through which relationships with wealthy 'others' – missionaries, private institutions, and oil companies – is understood. However, were it not for the central dynamic of non-equivalence that underlies the Ye'kwana-Sanema relationship, it might very well be consistent with the demand-sharing model. While Nicolas Peterson suggests that demanding and deference go hand in hand (1993: 869), I will show towards the end of this article that such systems of exchange become predation when devoid of mutuality.

For the Sanema, access to goods was the dominant marker of differentiation between themselves and the Ye'kwana, evident in Nerys' description:

Our forefathers weren't rich; they didn't have machetes or shotguns, so now we are poor even today. The Ye'kwana are rich, they have beautiful houses, they have shotguns and beautiful hammocks. The Ye'kwana are rich. In the beginning, they had pots, machete, griddles. They are the ones who had them first, not the Sanema.

When Nerys talked of the Ye'kwana receiving things 'first', she was referring not only to their long history of exchange with non-indigenous peoples described above, but also to their depiction in mythology. While Ye'kwana myths present the Sanema as naïve, depraved, and malevolent beings who need pacifying (see de Civrieux 1997 [1970]: 90), Sanema mythology portrays Ye'kwana in a more ambivalent light. More often than not, it is not character imperfections that are foregrounded, but rather their relative good fortune, particularly in

terms of their material wealth. The Myth of the Origin of Modern Goods, for example, tells of primordial Ye'kwana accepting the goods – aeroplanes, shotguns, pens and paper, blankets, and shirts – offered by the mythical creator demiurge Omaö, while the Sanema rejected them all. In his frustration, Omaö proclaimed: 'O dear! This is really bad. These Sanema don't want to be like Yekuana at all I'm afraid. Not yet it seems. I think it must wait until later' (Colchester 1981: 68). It was Omaö's trickster brother Soawë who instead furnished the Sanema with rudimentary items such as arrows and hammocks made from liana. Omaö decided to 'prepare the Sanema really slowly', so that they remained as 'children' while all the others – including Ye'kwana and non-indigenous peoples – flourished thanks to the manufactured goods they graciously accepted.

Though historical accounts indicate that the satellite structure following the 'war' in the 1930s was forced upon the Sanema as a form of control, conversations with my Sanema associates revealed something quite different. Most interlocutors stated that they 'looked for' a Ye'kwana community where they could set up camp briefly, as Coromoto describes:

Our group used to travel wherever we wanted in the forest. One man went ahead one day and discovered a Ye'kwana community. When he returned he said, 'There are Ye'kwana there', and so my parents responded, 'Let's go there and see what they have'. We asked for land to make our house and we stayed there for three years.

While accounts of life in satellite communities varied greatly, in all cases it was clear that the Sanema chose when to live there and, equally, when to move away, just as Iskisioma described when recounting her movements as a youth: 'The Ye'kwana gave us a garden and a lot of yucca, but because there were many of us, the yucca ran out quickly, so we said, "Let's

leave now and return to where we were”’.

Stories of the Sanema’s willingness and desire to live near the Ye’kwana were abundant, and were often expressed in terms of opportunities, the most important of which was the chance to acquire desirable goods. In some accounts they obtained pots, hammocks, beads, clothes, and machetes, while in other cases they were given only yucca to eat. Others emphasized the acquisition of important new skills such as weaving *sebucáns* (yucca straining baskets) or producing manioc beer. One research associate, Old Juan, illustrated the importance of goods procurement when I questioned why his family had decided to live near the Ye’kwana in his youth. With wide animated eyes and exaggerated hand gestures, he bellowed in characteristic Sanema style: ‘Oooh, they gave us soooo many things!’ On another occasion, a woman speaking of her childhood in a satellite community recounted how her father would describe the Ye’kwana as ‘good people because they gave us pots, hammocks, and clothes’, even though these same people would ‘beat them with poles’. When they decided they had had enough, however, they simply moved away.

As we can see, then, Sanema contact with Ye’kwana throughout history has not been formed through acts of coercion or ‘capture’. Quite the contrary: many Sanema life histories recount continual movement from place to place, frequently stopping at Ye’kwana communities for several months in order to obtain goods, before deciding to move on, often to another satellite community for a period (for a similar case among the Makú, see Jackson 1983). Writing on debt-peonage among the Ashéninka of Peru, Evan Killick (2011) similarly illustrates how relations of debt are in fact pursued by those formerly seen to be oppressed and coerced by their *patrones* (traders). He shows how Ashéninka willingly and enthusiastically enter into such relations in order to create an ongoing dynamic of delayed and balanced exchange, and, moreover, that they exert considerable power within the relationship because they threaten to ‘disappear’ without notice if the *patrones* do not instil

sufficient trust. What we are seeing among the Sanema resembles this type of inverted interplay of power, and yet while they seek similar relations of dependence, ongoing and balanced exchange – and the equal ties at its heart – do not seem to be pursued in their case. Rather, I would like to suggest that their submissive demeanour in fact enables a freedom of mobility similar to that described by Killick, because by being subservient they are not engaging as equals and hence are not ‘bound’ to the relationship in the same way. That is, their obligation to reciprocate as equals in delayed exchange is subverted. What is pertinent in this case is the fact that autonomy is maintained throughout, and that the relationship is predicated not on exchange, but rather on natural abundance, in which one can take without incurring any debts (recall that the Huaorani also avoid debt through demand-sharing). With this in mind, I will demonstrate that the relationship of dependency that I have thus far been describing might be viewed as a strategy for ‘dodging one’s debts’.

Dodging debts as a predatory act

One of my first introductions to Sanema life was while in the company of a Ye’kwana woman back in 2008. We had stopped at a Sanema settlement on our way downstream to the frontier town and she brazenly walked me around the community to observe the Sanema going about their daily lives. ‘They learned that from us; they copy everything we do’, she stated while gesturing towards one household hard at work processing manioc. She went on, ‘In the past they didn’t have anything; everything they have they got from us’. While stressing that it was important to help these unfortunate people, my Ye’kwana companion followed with complaints that they always ‘begged’ her for things and continually requested lifts to the town because they had no canoes or motors of their own. ‘Do they offer anything in return?’ I asked hesitantly. She looked at me with discernible surprise, ‘Nothing!’ she replied. ‘They don’t *have* anything!’⁶ While this declaration was somewhat overstated, I

myself had rarely, if ever, seen the Sanema offering goods to the Ye'kwana; and while a leg of peccary might be demanded of them if cunningly spotted, gifts were rarely offered in return for goods bestowed. What the Ye'kwana obtained from the Sanema, if anything, was labour, and even then only with a great deal of effort and frustration.⁷

Though one might argue that reciprocity is clearly established through the provision of labour, from the Sanema perspective the tasks that are set for them are not a straightforward return because they cannot be actively coerced or made to commit to their labour obligations, which is strikingly palpable in the strained relations between the two groups. Many Ye'kwana described the Sanema as 'lazy', refusing to work, and sometimes disappearing or 'escaping' without a word before tasks had been completed. Often the Sanema even packed up camp and departed for good while in the midst of their 'commitments'. I observed on a number of occasions the Sanema's reluctance to engage in labour with Ye'kwana or non-indigenous peoples, often only deigning to shift after being yelled at. It seemed that the Sanema did not feel impelled to work in return for a gift, and likewise did not see labour as a long-term strategy for continual reciprocity, mutuality, or some form of bondage. As was mentioned above, many Sanema also did not respond well to Ye'kwana attempts at imposing leadership strategies to improve cohesiveness (Colchester 1982: 107), indicating that they were far more difficult to control than might at first appear.

The demand-sharing model described above indicated that ownership over material goods does not precisely imply exclusive rights because all possessions can in theory be appropriated through demands. Control over one's labour, on the other hand, is the essence of the autonomous self in Amazonia (Clastres 1987: 168-9; Overing 2003: 307; Santos Granero 1986: 664) and people can be made to do chores only through leading by example or the gentle persuasion of others, never by coercion (see Brown 1993). This autonomous subjectivity is indeed integral to Sanema personhood; emphasized in the closing phrase, 'I'm

just like that' (*ina sa kuaö*), which is regularly tacked on to the end of personal stories or accounts to emphasize unique characteristics, perspectives, and choices. Certain personalities do foment conflicts more than others, and were generally the source of a great deal of rumour. Nevertheless, while such gossip helps to articulate moral principles about acceptable behaviour, it does not create coercive or restrictive rules. When describing flawed behaviour, many simply state that 'he/she is just like that'. In this way, people can never be forced to do something or act in a particular way, and in fact they regularly reject their obligations; or to put it another way, they often dodge their debts.

A good example of this would be bride-service (*suhamo*). This role was described above in terms of the moral register of fear-shame – *kili* – but when speaking Spanish, my Sanema friends would describe the process to me as 'paying for the daughter' (*pagando para la hija*). This latter term suggests that bride-service among the Sanema might be understood as a relationship of debt to the father-in-law (see also Hugh-Jones 2013: 369). Debt can be a particularly useful concept to employ here because it suggests a set of obligations, both cosmological and social, towards transactions that may or may not be honoured.⁸ Furthermore, the regularity with which Sanema sons-in-law would eschew their bride-service responsibilities, much to the frustration of their parents-in-law, led me to question the degree of indebtedness perceived in these supposedly morally fixed and uncontested duties (e.g. Rivière 1984).

This notion of debt could also be extended to the cosmos as a whole (see also Graeber 2012: 68 on primordial-debt theory), in which all relationality might be understood as a web of debts. Indeed, unlike the Huaorani philosophy of the generous 'abundance' of nature, the Sanema believe that the forest is filled with vengeful beings who impose endless debts upon them, most often demanded by the potent spirits of game animals. Spirits and spirit masters, by their very nature, can never relinquish things willingly, but on the contrary will not rest

without a return payment of some form. This resulting spirit revenge gives rise to all known illness and misfortune and is precipitated by moral transgressions such as dietary infringements during menstruation, pregnancy, and shamanic training. Colchester described this notion of return among the Sanema as a fundamental ethos, as important to cosmological relationality as it is to economic transactions: ‘When they take from “nature” they expect “nature” to take “revenge” (no’a): “nature” is “expensive” (no’apī)’ (1982: 493). This idea that nature is costly is metonymic with the notion that forest spirits incur debts, and evading such debts is a process of skilful concealment and subterfuge in the form of social precautions and prohibitions. This is why Sanema refrain from entering forests during moments of foreboding, such as when the sky swells with black clouds or when babies cry incessantly, and why they avoid certain game meat during liminal life phases, as just mentioned. Yet not all nature is as expensive in equal measure. In the case of *onihamo*, for instance, in which sudden deaths occur as a result of over-hunting, peccaries slain in large groups were not believed to cause this ominous fate because, my host father assured me, ‘if you hear their spirit master bird sing, *solokokoko*, you can kill the peccaries; this is worth nothing’ (see a similar case in Bonilla 2005: 52). In other words, this is worth nothing because this incurs no debts.

Not only does this notion of return-through-vengeance characterize the forest realm, it is also a component of the partible human soul, *okola*, the spirit of revenge (see Colchester 1982: 449). Yet the value placed on autonomy, described above, often results in many ‘fleeing’ (*tokōso*) from the potential revenge of others, as well as eschewing the revenge owed to them. This was articulated on one occasion when an inebriated man had hit his wife during a community celebration, but the woman had not retaliated. As she sobbed, her female companions repeatedly goaded her to take revenge, as was the honourable practice in such cases. One woman shouted: ‘You are afraid! You don’t hit your husband; you are not a

person!’ Despite her weeping and the criticisms hurled her way, the woman never did claim her revenge, and was left ultimately to determine her own outcome in events, even if it meant not taking part in expected systems of return. In a similar way, the Sanema seemed to be regularly and surreptitiously evading debts of labour to the Ye’kwana: they would depart when they wished and usually partook in labour activities only at their whim.⁹ Thus, rather than being exploited, the Sanema seemed to be extracting goods and rejecting reciprocity, an insight which, coupled with the value placed on autonomy, leads one to question who the ‘predators’ really are in this case, and indeed to rethink the concept of predation more broadly.

In Philippe Descola’s book *Beyond nature and culture* (2013), he describes predation as a mode of relation premised on the deliberate rejection or negation of peaceful exchange with others, and includes as examples phenomena such as the capture of slaves and hunting. What is important in this idea is the notion that predation is an acute effort to incorporate the material possessions, substances, and identities of others while at the same time rejecting customary modes of reciprocity and affinal obligations. Put another way, it is a paradigmatic tool for dodging one’s debts. These descriptions, however, portray the captors as predators and the captured as powerless, yet we have seen that the Sanema are far from powerless in their interactions with the Ye’kwana. They continue to maintain their social structure, kin ties, and autonomy even when ‘coexisting’ with Ye’kwana in their satellite encampments (compare to the case of the Akuriyo in Grotti & Brightman 2010). Hence, they are not ‘ripped from their context’ (Graeber 2012: 168), they do not undergo a ‘social death’ (Patterson 1990), nor do they relinquish any prior rights and obligations, as was the case with captured slaves in the past (see Santos-Granero 2009: chap. 2). What is compelling about this case of extraction without reciprocity is the fact that it enables a view of predation that departs from the violent typecasting with which it is usually associated (warfare,

headhunting, and cannibalism). Predation in the contemporary context can be a peaceful and in some ways co-operative act. In the case I have highlighted here, after the war with the Ye'kwana, procuring goods through raiding was no longer plausible, and once their lives had become decidedly imbricated with the state and its institutions – which enforce a logic of multiculturalism, peace, and co-operation – the Sanema were impelled to adapt their predatory acts in a new and creative way, namely through a submissive demeanour.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that historical relations between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema have been defined by a sustained dynamic of asymmetry, and that all modes of interaction between the two groups were methods of 'extracting' precious resources from the Ye'kwana, whether violently or peacefully.¹⁰ The ethnography has highlighted that the more recent arrangement of dependence is actively pursued by the Sanema as a way to 'extract' resources from their Ye'kwana neighbours by eliciting empathy while at the same time rejecting any long-term commitments of reciprocity that symmetry demands; in essence, they are eschewing their debts to the Ye'kwana just as they do in many other contexts. Rejecting one's obligations in this way is comparable to the Amazonian modality known as predation, and is made possible owing to the value of the autonomous self in the region, allowing one to shun reciprocity if one chooses, to detach from one's relationships at any point, or to reject some long-term responsibilities. It is as though in this case a 'symbolic economy of alterity' (predation) in fact enables a 'moral economy of intimacy' (egalitarianism) to exist, and that the relationships between the 'prey' worldview, autonomy, and goods extraction are intimately intertwined.

On analysing the moral principles of economic relations, David Graeber (2001: 219-21) notes that what makes reciprocity unique (as opposed to 'communism' or 'hierarchy', see

also Graeber 2012: 94-113) is the fact that it can, in theory, be cancelled out or ‘closed off’. By this he means that one is able to nullify ongoing ties and maintain a degree of freedom if one wishes to do so. Given that gift economies are continually creating shifting ‘inferiorities’, as he describes it, they are defined not by absolute equality *per se*, but by a ‘*fragile, competitive* equality between actors’ (2001: 221, emphasis added; see also Fausto 1999: 936). In the Sanema case, though, the dynamic of ‘inferiority’ or ‘disequilibrium’ is both intentional and prior to the relationship of exchange, not the result of it. In other words, it is their dependent position that grants them their freedom because they are absolved of the long-term responsibilities inherent in ongoing exchange, which was evident when the Sanema decided abruptly to leave a satellite community and abandon their labour obligations to the Ye’kwana. As such, while the Euro-American presumption is that only equality can facilitate freedom and autonomy (see Callinicos 2000), the example of the Sanema demonstrates that this might not always be the case. For them, it is actually asymmetry or the act of wilful submission that enables freedom and autonomy. Returning, then, to the reconceptualization of freedom that authors such as James Ferguson (2013) and Saba Mahmood (2004) propose, the Sanema’s dependency on the Ye’kwana should be understood not as indifference to freedom, as is suggested in the Ferguson and Mahmood cases, but, on the contrary, as a desire for freedom – a freedom that is facilitated through autonomy and independence from reciprocity, both of which are accomplished through voluntary subjection.

NOTES

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¹ In addition to Sanema, the other three linguistic groups include Yanomami, Yanomamö, and Ninam (Yaroamö has also recently been included). The language family as a whole has become known as the Yanomami.

² My fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2011 in both Bolivar and Amazonas states of southern Venezuela. All place names and personal names in this article have been changed to protect the identities of the people involved.

³ There were very few long-term cases of debt-peonage in Venezuela, however, as the rubber trade in the region was short-lived (Barham & Coomes 1994: 41). Furthermore, there are no itinerant traders in this region of Amazonia.

⁴ This is notable, for example, in the fact that there is a difference in terms between siblings of the same sex and siblings of the opposite sex.

⁵ This statement should not be interpreted as a devaluation of children, old people, and women, but rather shows that categories of non-equivalence, while maintaining limited fluidity, should at any given time be recognized and respected. To suggest otherwise is to intimate that they exist in a form of incompleteness (see, e.g., the description of Sanema as children in the Myth of the Origin of Modern Goods).

⁶ This statement echoes Ye'kwana mythology, which exclaims of the Sanema: 'That is why they come to rob us for they have nothing to give in exchange for our things' (de Civrieux 1997 [1970]: 90).

⁷ Though the dynamic with the Ye'kwana is one of assigned labour, trade does occur between Sanema communities. Recently, however, these practices have significantly reduced owing to their gradual move northwards towards national society and their increased settlement along large rivers, resulting in a reduction in proximity to other Sanema

communities. They are now progressively procuring goods from the state through Bolivarian projects (see Penfield 2016).

⁸ Indeed, there is an emerging re-analysis of Mauss's theory of the gift to explore it as a form of credit and debt, particularly as a way to facilitate webs of dependency (see, e.g., Shipton 2010: 217).

⁹ This may be different from other dependent groups in Amazonia, such as the Paumari, who relinquish a degree of freedom to secure the bonds that bring forth goods (see Bonilla 2005).

¹⁰ Although I do not have space to do so here, one could reasonably go further to unpack the notion of 'peace' and 'peacefulness'. There are currently few physical antagonisms between the two groups, but forms of 'violence' might be seen to manifest in subtle new ways.

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